

CHAPTER 6

CITY SQUATTING AND URBAN CAMPING

It is curious how people take it for granted that they have a right to preach at you and pray over you as soon as your income falls below a certain level.

—George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*

THE JOURNEY TO URBAN CAMPING

Four of us sit outside Flora's Coffee Shop and Gallery on the corner of Franklin Avenue and Rue Royal in Faubourg Marigny, waiting for the New Orleans rain gods to get bored. Earlier, Shannon had texted me to "bring a tarp, a sheet, bug net, water, food for morning, and a flashlight or headlamp." She's wary of the rain and the trouble it might bring because, after a life of traveling, squatting, and hopping freight trains or grainer trains, her feet are sensitive to long periods of being wet. We decide to throw caution to the wind and scope out a place to squat for the night. Our urban camping adventure begins.

It is about 4 p.m. as we mount our bikes and point north toward St. Claude. We head over the train tracks and pedal east toward the Ninth Ward on a road in such a state of decay that it is more potholes than paved street. We pass abandoned, graffiti-covered buildings and a vacant lot containing filthy mattresses, sofas, and tires. Even the trees look derelict. To the left, a partially boarded-up warehouse has graffiti announcing “Vampire Sex,” “Oye,” and “Finish Your Cereal.” Nearby, layers of decay and abandonment surround two lonely and stubborn houses.

We work our way past the hurricane-torn warehouses—one of them spray painted with the word “why”—and on to a half-filled parking lot. This area is filled with abandoned houses and buildings. Now it’s a matter of finding the right one.

We zero in on two boarded-up and abandoned houses. We climb the first one’s porch steps. A book lies open. So does the door. It’s obvious that someone else is currently squatting here. There are piles of belongings, including blankets, mattresses, pillows, clothes, and tools carefully arranged in one room. Another room is filled with printed material, some of which seems to be of a religious nature.

We decide to ride further, eventually passing an urban garden where Habitat for Humanity rents plots for a dollar per year. Some people use the garden to grow subsistence food; others grow produce to sell to local restaurants. A few local businesses own some of these plots. Another urban garden sits on the right as we ride beneath the North Galvez overpass, under which mattresses and other refuse litter the weeds. Graffiti on the overpass: “Turn the world around.” Another building’s graffiti reads, “DO NOT DEMOLISH: New Owner—William McGowan Notice Violation, 6/5/2015,” in three separate places. Three sofas are stockpiled out back, sitting next to an enormous, semi-gated, and empty plot of land with a sign: “Private Property, No Trespassing.” A train screeches nearby; we find more vacant lots and two more boarded-up houses on the corner of Montegut and North Miro streets. Piles of mattresses, old tires, and plywood litter the streets and empty lots. A lilac tree grows defiantly above this mess. One sign lying in the dump: “Re-Elect Judge Medley.”

Passing North Dorgenois Street, we spot a vacant house, perhaps suitable for unlawful squatting. Taking a left on the ironically named Law Street, which dead-ends at the train tracks, we discover that it is one of a cluster of four shambled houses worth investigating. Two are occupied. Of the other two, one is a gutted double shotgun—no furniture, no drywall, no anything, really, but exterior walls and, thankfully, a fine intact roof. The only thing living here are happy birds nesting atop the sad, drooping ceiling fans. Unfortunately, it sits next to a reasonably maintained, fully occupied house. The neighbors are too close, rendering our potential squat unsuitable. Shannon explains that good squats must be at least one or two lots away from occupied homes. It's too troublesome, and potentially dangerous, to squat next to neighbors who might call the police—or worse. Across the street and to the left, the remnants of another possible squat are hidden within runaway weeds and untamed shrubbery; this is a neighborhood nature is trying its best to reclaim.

Picking up our bikes, we realize the street doesn't dead-end. Rather, it curves right onto Law and Press streets, heading away from the train tracks, where a barbed-wire fence "protects" it from freight hoppers. Three stone steps emerge from the weeds on the right, with no obvious purpose. Perhaps before Hurricane Katrina devastated the neighborhood, there would have been a suitable squat here. If there was, it's long gone now. We hit Press Drive and Lausset Place and find a potentially perfect squat tucked away and hidden on the left, with the train tracks just ahead. On both sides sit vacant lots, the nearest house roughly thirty yards away. It's a crazy little green double-shotgun house, the property lined with tires and makeshift fences. A purple and green sign reads "NO DUMPING" in faded gold paint. We set our bikes near a rotting gazebo on the property. Vegetation completely consumes the front of the house along with its porch, blocking entry into the space. We find an alternative entrance—a hole in the wall on the right of the house, only accessed after traversing mounds of garbage, weeds, and roof tiles. We push through the weeds and climb through the hole to find solid floorboards and a suitable roof. In a pinch, the place is good for squatting. It is hidden on a barely

navigable road that dead-ends at remote train tracks in the middle of nowhere. This is not the New Orleans I know or recognize.

In the distance, the skyline of that more familiar New Orleans peeks out from behind the tracks. Shannon says she knows of a better spot, so it's on our bikes, and we're off again. We take a left onto Press and hit Florida Street, where we find men working, surveying land, and operating construction machinery. The road is barely navigable, even for bikes, but the construction workers pay us no mind. The humidity is oppressive and feels punishing—the heat index kissing the 102-degree mark. In the distance, we see a building owned by the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans. It appears to be a rundown, dilapidated old pumping station, but we are unsure if it is still in use.

As we travel, we see scores of vacant lots peppering the half-abandoned neighborhood. Squatters sit on the porches of deserted homes, and feral roosters cross the proverbial road. It feels like a strange rural New Orleans just days after the storm, not ten years later.

We take a right on Comus Court to inspect a possible squat house. This decrepit pink house remains shut tight, with boards blocking any entrance from the windows or doors. A FEMA glyph marks the front of the house, a remnant from those dark days in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, signifying that the house had been searched by officials. Like those painted on nearly every house in every flooded neighborhood, the glyph is formed from a large “X” with a different notation in each quadrant. At the top, the number “926” signifies the date the house was searched: September 26, 2005. The lack of a mark in the right quadrant means no hazards were present. A “0” at the bottom means no bodies, dead or alive, were found inside. The “FL-2” on the left identifies the search party. We turn around and hit Rocheblave Street, heading down toward the train tracks to Port Street. There we see a variety of vacant houses, all offering possible squats. One house, gutted and half-rebuilt, has the single word “Tried” spray-painted on the front. The owners must have run out of money. Down half a block, we find two more boarded-up and vacant houses on the left and a warehouse to the right, all covered

in graffiti. Next to the warehouse, we find piles of tires and wood near the shell of an old brick house—and graffiti that reads: “1 DEAD 9/17.”

Ms. Lolita, an elderly woman who moved to New Orleans in 1976 and now lives next door to our potential squat, later told me that Pastor Joe William, a preacher from a church in the Ninth Ward, drowned in this house. According to Ms. Lolita, he was found “standing in the door stiff as a board” despite her pleading for him to vacate the premises ahead of the storm. It was a shame, she said. The preacher had seven children, or to capture her beautiful New Orleans pronunciation, “chirren.”

We tramp through vegetation and over tires dumped in front of the house where the preacher once lived, and we make our way inside. We find a sign that reads, “Moms Drunk Again” and “Keep This Squat Nice Bitches.” This “nice” squatter space has a sofa along with two chairs, in front of a fireplace. The room is littered with debris and used-up urban camping gear. Dozens of old, empty candles barely provide enough light to augment the bright light from the full moon. We walk through two rooms and, stepping through a hole in the wall, into the side yard of another house, boarded up except for a back opening where a door was once placed. This is where we enter our squat for the night. Shannon calls it “bum central.” People she knew once squatted here.

At about seven in the evening, before settling in for the night, we search dumpsters and trashcans for cardboard-box bedding. We search other vacant houses looking for remnants of useful squatter gear. Graffiti on the back entrance of one squatter house reads, “Squat the World,” but it has no cardboard boxes. We walk into another former squat; it’s filled with roaches skittering and flying all over the place. We find enough flattened, and likely previously used, cardboard boxes on which to lay our heads for the night. We’ve brought along cheap whiskey to chase with our red wine. Together we return to our house to crack open the bottles.

Shannon shares a story about love and lust, dreams and fantasies, and about the joy of living a life of freedom—as well as the terror that such a life brings—as we drink the night away. It’s a

story similar to those of many squatters living transgressive, transient lifestyles deep in the underbelly of America. This world is not for the faint of heart.

GUTTER PUNKS IN NEW ORLEANS

It's common to walk past transients and gutter punks, or nomads, as they often prefer to be called, while passing through Decatur, Royal, St. Louis, and Frenchmen streets in and around the French Quarter. They might commit olfactory terrorism on passersby, but society treats them even worse. In 2015, the New Orleans Police Department targeted gutter punks throughout the French Quarter and Frenchmen Street, arresting twenty-two people on twenty-eight charges. In most cases, they were petty misdemeanors like aggressive solicitation, illegal vending, obstruction of public rights-of-way, carrying open glass containers, and public intoxication.¹ For these crimes, the names of each of those arrested appeared in the local paper—a typical Goffmanesque “degradation ceremony” that publicly shames and symbolically strips people of their roles as legitimate members of society and places them into the category of outcasts.² Every New Orleans police officer knows that these laws are rarely enforced, except as an excuse to question, arrest, or detain a person that garners the interest of a police officer.

The notorious local entrepreneur Sydney Torres, who made his wealth as the founder of a sanitation company called SDT Waste & Debris Services, a firm that scrubbed the city in the years after Hurricane Katrina, personally funded a private police patrol for the French Quarter and surrounding areas called the French Quarter Task Force. Residents and business owners can contact this private police force, which includes NOPD officers, using a cellphone crime-reporting app.³ Like his efforts after the storm, Torres's more recent labors are aimed at sanitizing the streets of the French Quarter and the Marigny. The difference is that, in this case, the garbage he's collecting is of the human variety. Most

business owners in the area loved it. According to newspaper reports, city officials called it “a coordinated effort to address recent nuisance violation complaints from business owners” targeting transients, or gutter punks, in the city. “Basically,” Torres said unapologetically to the *New York Times Magazine*, “I’m handling crime the same way I did trash.”⁴

While some gutter punks can call home for money, many have burned those bridges after years of homelessness and drug abuse and now must confront the reality that they are not merely down but also out. These transient nomads lead resistant lifestyles and often pay the price for it. This distinct aspect of late capitalism—that it values humans based on their economic contributions to a capitalist labor market—is best revealed when looking at how these transients find the cracks and crevices of social space beyond the eyes of Big Brother and the system of social control.

THE SQUATTERS OF NEW ORLEANS

Squatting is the act of taking over an abandoned building and repurposing it for public or private use. Hobohemia, or the districts in the city where homeless people gravitate, consists of main “stems” or “drags” for down-and-out urban dwellers that are often geographically divided north, south, east, and west from city centers like the Loop in Chicago, Greenwich Village in New York, or the French Quarter in New Orleans. ⁵ Squatters in Hobohemia create “jungles,” camps that act as social centers or places of leisure and rest free from hassle.⁶ Urban campers, or squatters, make abandoned and vacant residential properties relatively secure spaces to lay their heads, safe havens away from tough urban life. These urban camps consist of largely improvised shacks near city centers. While some squats or urban camps serve as temporary habitats for the highly mobile transient populations moving through cities, many urban camps serve as what the classic sociologist Nels Anderson calls “continuous or

permanent jungles” where squatters transform abandoned city spaces into safe places they call home.⁷

Of course, it's not always safe. Only a few years ago one of the deadliest fires in the city's recent memory took the lives of eight urban campers in an abandoned Ninth Ward warehouse at the corner of St. Ferdinand and North Prieur streets.⁸ According to newspaper reports, most of those who perished were outsiders whose paths fatally intersected in New Orleans.

These young travelers are the latest version of Jack Kerouac's beatniks pursuing adventure, self-awareness, creativity, and transcendence. Some of these travelers make New Orleans their permanent homes and become part of the fabric of the local culture. Some even become locally successful artists and musicians or community advocates and activists. Others stay for a few days or weeks before heading out to new adventures on the road. Still others maintain annual seasonal residence in New Orleans after spending parts of the year hopping freight trains around the country or returning home to family. These travelers come in many varieties, from drugged-out gutter punks to educated, middle-class youths with an itch for adventure and travel, and everything in between. Some refer to these transgressive travelers as “crusty kids” when they are particularly dirty and overly tattooed, “travelers” when they are more “respectable” youths with some ambition, “hobos” when they get beyond youthful appearances, and “oogles” when they conceal their access to money. These drifters hop freight trains and hitchhike, making money by panhandling, begging, busking, and working odd jobs in the formal and semiformal economy. While some split rent in apartments, most squat in the abandoned houses all over the city, especially hurricane-torn houses in the historically black neighborhoods near the French Quarter. Urban campers turn these storm-damaged houses into temporary homes. This requires developing some serious urban camping skills, which many travelers learn while on the road.

TRAVELER NETWORKING

Many urban campers are travelers who develop creative networking strategies while vagabonding through the United States and Canada. They often connect in the most well-known bohemian districts and neighborhoods of the country—Bushwick in Brooklyn, the East Village and Lower East Side of Manhattan, Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, Venice Beach in Los Angeles, and Wicker Park in Chicago, as well as the more “bohemian” areas of Seattle and Portland, Oregon—while also navigating to the new and upcoming hipster spots such as Savannah, Georgia, and Asheville, North Carolina, as well as various towns and cities in Colorado, a state where cannabis is legal. New Orleans is perhaps the new mecca of hipster bohemia, and it attracts transgressive travelers and gutter punks from all over the country. While some hitchhike across the North American landscape, many travel by hopping trains, using “hobo gold” as their guide, if they’re fortunate enough to find it.

The travelers share with one another important information on travel and advice on the best places to venture. The best places usually share some common characteristics: a culture with a rich history; a large music and art scene; a bohemian reputation; relaxed or loosely enforced laws on loitering, busking, and panhandling; tourist destinations; cheap and affordable living conditions; opportunities for cheap and free food and drinks; and an established reputation for tolerance for travelers. Kia, a traveler from Washington and Vermont, learned about New Orleans and its music scene from gutter punks traveling through Burlington. She hitchhiked and rode freight trains to New Orleans. She claims her soul has a personal connection with the city. “If you are here, you can feel *it*.” Still others have different but related stories about coming to New Orleans.

Gigi explains her reason for being in New Orleans using words such as “serendipity,” “happenstance,” and “chaos”—things that resonate well with conceptions of New Orleans. She grew up around “punk circus freaks” and now lives around the Mudlark Public Theater, a Port Street puppet playhouse. After hearing

about New Orleans from fellow travelers, she arrived for “two magical weeks” following a particularly tough chapter in her life: the tragic loss of her boyfriend of three years, whom she describes as a “world-traveling freak clown,” who died after falling out of a New York City building. The two had shared a deep appreciation of the English fantasy author Terry Pratchett’s *The Colour of Magic*, which makes references to the colors purple and green ⁹—colors that, with gold, make up the traditional colors of Mardi Gras and that, as she soon learned, turn up often in New Orleans. “Everything is purple and green, and purple and green flags are everywhere with clowns on it,” Gigi said. “Just look at this magical place.” She soon moved to the city of purple and green (and gold, too) and, as she puts it, “adopted the ‘*le bon temps rouler*’ attitude of New Orleans.”¹⁰ Gigi explains, “We are just musicians trying to meet like-minded people,” and advises, “Fail your ass off. Live your life and have real experiences that are much more important than pieces of paper that tell you how valuable you are.” While sitting just outside of Fair Grinds Coffee near the corner of Esplanade and Ponce de Leon, Gigi proclaims enthusiastically, “I just want to live ...”—she pauses as we both watch a man ride past on a ten-foot-tall unicycle—then she points to him and continues, “A life that is just like that guy.”

Travelers like Kia and Gigi met while traveling the United States. Once they arrive at a stopping point, especially in cities like New Orleans, they use the same networking strategies to survive on the urban streets. One of the most important skills to acquire is finding a cheap place to sleep. Meeting up with urban tribes of squatters offers an opportunity to find quickly the most affordable temporary homes near the French Quarter and bohemian sections of the city—and thus a convenient entrée to tourist-industry jobs in the formal and informal economy.

URBAN CAMPING STRATEGIES

To be counted as a housing unit, the census defines that the residence must be protected from the elements, or covered by a roof, doors, and windows. This accounts for much of the increase in vacant housing from 2000 to 2010 because of the number of houses abandoned and boarded up after Hurricane Katrina. The 2000 census, taken five years before Hurricane Katrina, shows that there were 26,840 vacant houses and apartments in the city, or 12.5 percent of the total residences.¹¹ In 2010, five years after the storm, there were 47,738 vacancies, or 25 percent—an increase of almost 21,000 housing units. According to the Data Research Center,¹² the biggest changes in vacant housing occurred in Central City, which had 3,449 vacant residential units (a change of +1,252); Hollygrove, with 865 (+539); the Seventh Ward, with 2,641 (+1,385); St. Roch, with 1,574 (+710); and Little Woods in New Orleans East, with 3,583 (+2,942). In 2010, there were also 978 vacant residential units in the Lower Ninth Ward, 1,984 in the French Quarter, 735 in the Bywater, 1,052 in the Lower Garden District, 1,124 in Tremé/Lafitte, 1,821 in Mid-City, 554 in Uptown, 1,733 in the St. Claude area, and 478 in the Marigny. According to a 2014 Census estimate, there were 269,584 vacant houses citywide, or 13.6 percent of the total residences.¹³ There were also 32,865 new houses built in 2010 or later, which could account for the lower percentage.

While census data provides information on the numbers and percentage of vacant houses in sections of the city, most travelers learn about the best places to squat from their social networks. In New Orleans, the best places to squat are in the historically black and/or working-class neighborhoods with a high percentage of vacant housing, like the Seventh and Ninth Wards and St. Roch.

Urban camping involves a hunt. After finding the target neighborhood, you must traverse these sometimes dangerous and unfamiliar areas, making sure to avoid the attention of neighbors. That's not always easy for white transients when traveling through predominantly black neighborhoods. The best way to travel is on a bike. It's often best to scope out numerous potential squats before deciding on the best available. The tools necessary for urban camping include a tent, cardboard box or mat, flashlight, lighter or

matches, insect repellent, and tarp, but the most important tool is knowledge of the strategies involved in searching for a squat and identifying the best places to urban camp. One squatter explains:

So another thing baffles me: Why don't people learn how to do this? We're not gonna be uncomfortable tonight. If it rains, the sun's not gonna beat down on us at 6 in the morning, police aren't gonna wake us up. It's like with the most minimal amount of forethought, urban camping anywhere is possible.... Just like in cities that are crawling with cops. You gotta find a spot where no one's gonna see you in the morning.

Space Between Neighbors

It's best to avoid squat houses that sit next to an occupied residential home. Neighbors will usually call the police if they suspect people are squatting in a vacant home next to their own. One reason is noise. Squatters don't want to have to remain in near silence while "at home." It's no fun to curtail behavior based on a fear of neighbors calling the police. And no one wants to get a surprise visit from the police in the middle of the night.

Intact Roof and Walls

The best houses for squatting protect urban campers from the outside elements, especially rain and the brutal Louisiana mosquitoes. Houses plagued with ants, mosquitoes, spiders, roaches, and other vermin can have severe repercussions on the health of squatters, as can overly damp conditions. I've seen many urban campers with horrible rashes and sores from insects, especially spiders. Many travelers suffer from what they call "rot foot," which one gets when traveling long distances in the rain with inadequate footwear. Suffice it to say, it's difficult and unhealthy to sleep in the rain or in wet conditions. A good squat must keep urban campers dry.

Level Floors Without Cracks

Squats with level floors make it easier for urban campers to set up a tarp and mat for the most comfortable night's sleep. Cracks in the floor give insects and other outside elements easy access to sleeping spaces in the house.

Back Yard

Don't shit where you eat, literally. Urban campers need a squat with a backyard to use as a bathroom. They usually piss in a specific area of the backyard and discretely crap into a plastic grocery-store bag and dispose of it in a nearby trashcan. One squatter put it:

When I have to piss tonight, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to wrap my left hand around this beam and I'm gonna lean my ass off of here and then take a piss, and I'm gonna wipe with the toilet paper that I bought. And if for some godforsaken reason my body decides that I need to take a shit while I'm here, I'm going to use one of those plastic bags that I brought and the toilet paper that I bought, and that will be fine.

Escape Route

It's best to have a secondary exit in the event that an escape must be made from people with violent intentions, hostile fellow squatters, or police. Escape routes also allow squatters places to flee other dangers, including fires.

Inconspicuous Areas or Tolerant Neighbors

While some neighbors might tolerate squatters they deem respectful to the area, most will alert the police if they suspect

people squatting in the buildings near their home. Since most squatters often travel in groups, packs of transients roaming in neighborhoods in which they obviously do not belong tend to attract the attention of community residents. Squats in inconspicuous places also make it easier to move in furniture and other household items that make urban camping more comfortable. As a result, the best squats are in inconspicuous locations removed from the eyes of residents or in places where neighbors tolerate transients roaming their neighborhoods. Though dangerous, some of the best squats lie in socially disorganized neighborhoods with high rates of crime, poverty, and other forms of social decay.

Close Proximity to Tourist Areas

Squats in close proximity to the French Quarter best meet the needs of many urban campers who make their living on the streets of the Vieux Carré. Many squatters lack reliable transportation and have a hard time keeping a bicycle safe, which makes cross-city travel difficult and sometimes dangerous. In fact, New Orleans has one of the highest bicycle death rates in the United States. It has become so bad that an organized group called the Bad News Bike Club paints white “ghost bikes” to place at each location in the city where a cyclist is killed, to memorialize the dead and serve as safety warnings for cyclists and motorists. Some of the city’s miscreant youth “have fun” with what they perceive as hipster bike riders traveling in their neighborhood, sometimes threatening and attacking them as they ride by. Suffice it to say, living close to the French Quarter is more convenient and safe. Squats near the French Quarter, however, are becoming increasingly difficult to find. One squatter puts it:

At the end of the day, there’s only a certain amount of abandoned buildings in New Orleans that are in a close proximity to the French Quarter, where everyone needs to be to make money. So because of this, and because they’re fixing more and more of these abandoned properties every

year, and because more travelers come here every year, slowly, you're having an abandoned house population close to the Quarter that's dwindling, and then you have a crusty population expanding. So these people want houses, except, crusty—the travelers, the punks, the people here who squat—whether they're clean-faced travelers, whether they're freshies, whether they've been riding trains for ten years, no matter who they are, there are still a limited amount of squats in close proximity to the Quarter.

Amenities

The more amenities a squat includes, the better the urban camping experience. While unusual, some urban camping sites might have running water, adequate plumbing, and a useable stove. Squats with private rooms and multipurpose rooms also add to the comforts of squats. While most squats look like garbage-filled dumps, other squatters put love and care into their squats, turning a potential dump into a fairly respectable place that can look almost like a regular, middle-class residential home.

PERILS OF SQUATTING

Make no mistake, squats can be dangerous. As a result, you've got to pick your monsters. There are unwelcome human intruders, like robbers and burglars, rapists and killers, police, and vigilante neighbors. Other monsters are of the nonhuman variety, including spiders, roaches, rats, mosquitoes, and other insects and rodents that crawl and bite. In many of the squats I frequented, roaches and spiders relentlessly swarmed the area while mosquitoes buzzed around like filthy, flying syringes. Many of the squatters reported—and provided visual evidence—of their rashes, sores, and infections. One squatter explains in depth:

I'm well versed in bugs and spiders, like that's my thing. Oh, but with a spider bite, when it bites you it'll turn black in the center after it builds up and pusses, and then it's too late. You have to go to a hospital because that hole will keep continuing to expand. When you get bit by a spider, a day later if you've got a head on it, you take a needle or a knife and you pull that head off and then they have a white spot called the core. You've gotta take that core out because as long as it has a core in it, it'll continue to rot. And there are two, one for each fang.

While squatters view nonhuman dangers as a mere unpleasant inconvenience, most fear human predators.

Squatters tell nostalgic stories of a past when transients roamed North America freely with fellow drifters who helped one another out along the way. They provided advice on cities, train-route information, and dangers to avoid. This hobo intelligence was mainly communicated with glyphs scrawled on the fences of friendly homes and with graffiti indicating the conditions and safety of the squat. They also followed informal rules, a sort of hobo code of conduct that travelers, it is widely believed, recognized and respected. In fact, a formal hobo code actually does exist.¹⁴ Hobos even have their own annual meeting, the Hobo National Convention, which was established over a century ago.¹⁵ At the 1889 National Hobo Convention held in St. Louis, a strict ethical code was established for hobos to follow while on the road. The first of the sixteen codes, "Decide your own life, don't let another person run or rule you," is a hobo philosophy that many transients still share. As one traveling youth in New Orleans put it: "Freedom means I do what I want to do when I want to do it." The other codes set the ethical guidelines for the transient community. A few of these codes follow:

- When in town, always respect the local law and officials, and try to be a gentleman at all times.
- Don't take advantage of someone who is in a vulnerable situation, locals or other hobos.

- Always try to find work, even if temporary, and always seek out jobs nobody wants....
- When no employment is available, make your own work by using your added talents at crafts.
- Do not allow yourself to become a stupid drunk and set a bad example for locals' treatment of other hobos.
- Always respect nature; do not leave garbage where you are jungling.
- If in a community jungle, always pitch in and help.
- Help your fellow hobos whenever and wherever needed, you may need their help someday.¹⁶

The sociologist of “Hobohemia” Nels Anderson found that in the 1920s, while urban campsites—or “jungles” as he called them—were rather hospitable and egalitarian, they had an informal code of conduct, or etiquette, that had to be adhered to strictly in the face of potentially harsh consequences. This unwritten but strictly enforced code of conduct addressed “jungle crimes,” including making fire by night in jungles, robbing other squatters at night, making the jungle a permanent hangout for “buzzards or moochers,” wasting food, and leaving pots and utensils dirty.¹⁷

These rules now seem to many of the transient youths a more romantic and nostalgic relic of days long past. Now, they argue, the transient life of squatting in urban centers is fraught with danger. Most transients account for this change in behaviors as both a “cultural shift” related to the increased demands of squat houses and the perceived increase in drug use among the traveling population. One urban camper explains: “There’s less places to stay that are close to the Quarter and there’s more scumbags that are staying in these places. So good people are forced to do bad things to make sure that their pack isn’t getting stolen, and it’s not getting any better.”

Other squatters echo the same arguments, stating that more transient youths are flooding into the city, and that while most respect the informal rules, others act irresponsibly mainly because of to drug use. One squatter says, “More kids are coming every year, and half of these people are like me: They have a hustle on

the street, they make their money, they eat their food, they swipe their cigarettes.... And then the other half do heroin. And those kinds of people can't coexist in these places [squats]." Some squatters complain that transients looking for an urban camping squat will come across their gear and steal it, a clear violation of formal and informal hobo codes.

Another squatter puts it, "And then people run off with each other's bags. And then people get into verbal arguments, and there's just animosity now. The cultural shift is also happening in New Orleans because people have to be cutthroat, but they don't want to be, necessarily. But they're being forced to." Still another transient youth squatting in the city argues that the desperation of the poor is reaching new heights. She says, "The amount of people that are aggressively panhandling in the city? They beg me. They beg *me*! I'm standing on the fuckin' corner, sitting on my crate! But you know what I'm saying?"

Others refrain from providing explanations of why things appear to be more dangerous. Instead, they describe the actual dangers. Louis, who has been squatting for the past few months in New Orleans paints a vivid picture of one of his most frightening nights in an abandoned building on North Rampart Street between the French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé:

One of the nights, I wake up to a bunch of flashlights. I'm used to sleeping in the road with my dog, like we don't like waking up to a bunch of flashlights.... Not only are there a bunch of flashlights, but they're swarming in through the front room and I start like, you know, looking around. And this little lazy dog.... I look around and like, all of them are running around with needles. Like, strapping, getting their veins ready, like literally running around with needles. In my head, I'm just like, I froze. Cause like, if one of these fucking people fall, that could be a needle in me. That is not something I was okay with. Like, having to wake up with that? Like knowing that my dog was running around on the floor, and they were like running around stumbling

everywhere? There's a level of comfort and respect, and they danced all over that.

Another transient youth who has been traveling for the past two years explains how things sometimes go down among squatters:

Except nowadays, when that happens with people, when people have a spit [argument], when somebody fucks up, and somebody decides they have to go and settle it, it's not about one-on-one anymore. Now, people come to where you live, your squat, with locks on chains, they call 'em smileys, and they'll beat you all upside the head with them. They'll come in when they know there are four of you in there. And they'll just beat you all up. It doesn't matter who's there. Stomp crew. They don't take your life. They want you to have your life because they want you to feel the pain. These kids are fucked up. *These kids are fucked up.*

One squatter sums it up nicely, without trying to explain the causes for the perceived growing dangers: "It's becoming scarier. I really wish I could tell you why everyone is acting so crazy. I can only offer those as my insights. It scares me." While many transients view themselves living a life of freedom, doing what they want and bowing to no master, it comes at a price. These vagabond wanderers might find creative ways to subvert institutional authority and avoid the normative expectations of mainstream society, but they also lead lives that often result in either self-destruction or tragedy at the hands of outside elements—both nonhuman and human. In the following case of the black political squatters of New Orleans, their greatest enemy is city government and its criminal justice system.

THE SQUATTERS OF WASHITAH MU'UR NATION

Some squatters of New Orleans don't just want to make a home. They want to make change. So they take over vacant houses to create urban camps that serve as their base for practical, spiritual, cultural, and political pursuits.¹⁸

Many black political squatters are part of the Washitah Mu'ur Nation, which combines many worldviews.¹⁹ They follow the teachings of Noble Drew Ali, the founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, who reimagines black identity and racial pride through developing alternative education and spiritual-reawakening methods that recast black history in a new light. He argues that black people are traditionally believers of Islam and are descended from the Moors. Along with following the ideas of Ali, they practice yoga at their squat house they call the Smai Tawi Temple.

Rota, a strikingly beautiful young woman of only eighteen years of age and one of the city's leading black political squatters, runs the Smai Tawi Temple. She claims that she lives the ancient Egyptian pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. She says, "I am not a squatter but a national in America."

She explains further while showing me around her temple squat: "That's what we do, I was just doing yoga right here, laying on the mat doing Smai Tawi, getting my mind right and uploading the messages from the sun. Ascending with the earth." Smai Tawi, she claims, is the first word for yoga and means merging one's higher self with one's lower self. "So that's the purpose of this space, to bring synergy and mastery of ourselves and learning how to not be unbalanced.... We meditate at 4 a.m. when we wake up and say the forty-two laws of Ma'at Under Kemet Law [an Ancient Egypt source for balance and moral and spiritual instruction] and meditate."

The Washitah Mu'ur Nation is a group that claims to be descended from indigenous people of the Americas that were black Africans, or at least a sovereign tribe descended from pre-Columbian black people who settled in North America. The Southern Poverty Law Center likens the Washitaw Nation, as they spell it, to a sovereign-citizens movement of "free peoples" not subject to laws imposed by city, state, or federal governments.

Washitah Mu'ur Nation of the Smai Tawi Temple also claims to have a right to the land. In particular, this claim applies to New Orleans, where they argue that the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 involved Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte selling only the city streets of New Orleans and its military barracks, not the approximately 827,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi River, for \$15 million to the American government. ²⁰ The rest of Louisiana, they believe, was stolen from the Washitaw Nation. As we sit in the Smai Tawi Temple, Rota explains their political and social position:

It's Smai Tawi. It is coming into consciousness that you were born on a planet that you don't have to pay fiat notes to live on. You, you came to your mama, did you ask "Mama, born me?" No. So why the fuck you gotta pay rent? That doesn't make no sense. That's not, that's not even sane. That's not sane. And for us to continue to live in an insane manner is fucked up. These people are gonna continue to kill each other if they keep living this way.

When asked what kind of movement they would consider themselves, three members of the Smai Tawi Temple squat agreed that it's a divine and national movement that involves spiritual, political, social, and economic dimensions. Rota says:

It's all of it, all of it. Like I told you, when Prophet Noble Drew had hit the pinnacle of the solution, he was sitting at the round table with the Congress and the Senates and the states and all of this to claim back our vast estate, and then the fucking Stock Market crashed and they started playing the game to get people to sign birth certificates so they could get them as collateral. That's when this game started.

They also claim that their movement is matriarchal, with strong ties to what some might consider radical feminism—and just a touch of eschatology. Rota explains that women who exist in this patriarchal society suffer from "toxicity." As a result, part of their belief system involves "lifting up fallen humanity, lifting up the

woman.” Rota says, “Women are born in toxicity. We are giving birth to toxicity, a toxic mind state. Until women get their womb clean and figure out what is the natural order of this, it’s not gonna be right.” According to Rota, getting the womb clean involves mental, physical, and spiritual healing. “We all have spiritual damage. The system we live in is damaging us spiritually to where we are losing our souls. We’re in the end times.” While the power of patriarchy remains important, the black political squatters want to transform their squat temple into a youth-empowerment project. Dongi, another one of the Smai Tawi Temple squatters says, “We’re just working to make this a transitional living space for anyone that wants to learn how to live with rain water and solar power, and bringing the catchment system over here. We’re actually getting certified as a 501-D communal nonprofit organization. This is now Smai Tawi. It’s like a reservation.”

The Washitah Mu’ur Nation of the Smai Tawi Temple also uses transgressive tactics to stake legal claims to abandoned or vacant houses in the Bywater neighborhood, deploying invented documents to present to police in order to avoid forcible removal from their squat, criminal charges, or both. In one of their squats, they issued to police a ten-page document, filled with seemingly nonsensical legal jargon, that laid “legal” claims to their rights to the property (see figure 6.1).

According to the *Times-Picayune*, one legal expert admits Washitah Mu’ur Nation’s cleverness. One real-estate lawyer is quoted as saying, “In a way, the Washitahs’ document is clever because it includes a legal description of the Bywater house, citations to legal cases and federal statutes, mysterious Latin words, and a whole lot of misused legal jargon. But when you look at what it actually says, it’s completely incoherent.”²¹ But it worked, at least at first.



THE MU'UR NATIONAL REPUBLIC
MU'UR DIVINE AND NATIONAL MOVEMENT OF THE WORLD
Mu'ur Americans, Aboriginal and Indigenous Natural Peoples of Northwest
Amexem, Northwest Africa / North America / 'The North Gate'

New Orleans, Louisiana Republic January 13, 2016

Yahmel Yaffu Ali Bey

AND

Yanamaria Latasha Bey

VS

CITY OF NEW ORLEANS

Department of Safety and Permits
Historic District Landmarks Commission
Vieux Carre Commission for Historic, Zoning,
And Building Violations
1300 Perdido St., Room 7W03
NEW ORLEANS, LA REPUBLIC [70112]

NOTICE OF CHARTERED EJECTMENT

Notice to Agent is Notice to Principal. Notice to Principal is Notice to Agent.

IGNORANTIAL LLEGIS, NEMINEM EXCUSAT

Ignorance of the Law is no excuse.

To Whom It May Concern:

The property situated at the addresses commonly referred to as: 3404 North Rampart Street, New Orleans, Louisiana Republic [70117], with a legal description commonly referred to as follows: Municipal District 3: Square 286; Lot 21 N. Rampart, 19 x 102, Latitude. Longitude (DMS) 29° 57' 55.1124" N, 90° 2' 26.5236" W, has been SEISED IN DEMESNEAS OF FEE, by Yanamaria Latasha Bey, who is part and parcel with the land, 'Authorized Representative of the Washitaw Nation', in an estate in fee-simple as a corporeal hereditament and now deemed the true lawful possessor of freehold property. Yanamaria Latasha Bey has seised as the true possessor of the land itself, with an estate of inheritance in fee-simple absolute. In the act of ALLODIUM peaceable possession, Yanamaria Latasha Bey is the true possessor bonafied finding the property in haereditas jacens prior to possession. Exercising rights in full capacity as in full life denoted as a Natural Person and an indigenous American National, Yanamaria Latasha Bey, lineal heir performed peaceable possession in the law of/La Ley favour 1/inheritance d/un home./

Despite the “legitimate” property owner—who is from California—showing the deed, bank documents, and tax records of the house to the police, authorities refused to evict the black political squatters, who seemed to have a legal document staking a claim to the property.²² The *Times-Picayune* reports: “In explaining why the squatters were not immediately turned out, the Police Department said that it wasn’t reasonable to expect a beat officer to parse seemingly official documents on the fly. The department, as Superintendent Michael Harrison put it, ‘had to do its due diligence.’”²³ According to the same newspaper report, Louisiana does have laws providing squatters’ rights. Though the article does not elaborate much on these rights, it is referring to Louisiana Civil Code Article 3486 of Acquisitive Prescription. In Louisiana, while criminal law is based on English common law, contract and tort law between private-sector parties is based on French and Spanish laws that derive from Roman law. Like so much else, even our legal system is different than the rest of the country. Louisiana’s acquisitive prescription is a civil law analogous to adverse possession, sometimes called squatters’ rights.

Of course, to possess a property that you don’t own is no small task. Adverse possession requires a squatter, or adverse possessor, to treat a property as an owner would. The adverse possessor must accomplish the following:

Act like an owner in her actual, open and notorious, continuous, and hostile possession because her possession should be sufficient to assure that the true owner has been provided with sufficient notice of the acts of the adverse possessor.... Actual possession requires that the possessor physically possess the property and have an intent to maintain control of that land. The possessor must exercise his dominion and control over the property such that there are visible signs of the possessor’s occupation.... Open and notorious possession refers to possession that is apparent and visible, as opposed to possession that is hidden.... Continuous possession requires that the adverse possessor

exercise acts of possession over the property throughout the entire requisite time period.... Hostile possession occurs when the possessor occupies the land without the consent of the true owner. When the true owner grants the adverse possessor permission to possess the land at issue, possession is not hostile.²⁴

Acquisitive prescription is encoded into the following articles of the Louisiana Civil Code:²⁵

Article. 3424. Acquisition of possession: To acquire possession, one must intend to possess as owner and must take corporeal possession of the thing.

Article. 3446. Acquisitive prescription: Acquisitive prescription is a mode of acquiring ownership or other real rights by possession for a period of time.

Article. 3476. Attributes of possession: The possessor must have corporeal possession, or civil possession preceded [*sic*] by corporeal possession, to acquire a thing by prescription. The possession must be continuous, uninterrupted, peaceable, public, and unequivocal.

Article. 3486. Immovables; prescription of thirty years: Ownership and other real rights in immovables may be acquired by the prescription of thirty years without the need of just title or possession in good faith.

Article 3486 serves as the real kicker, requiring the adverse possessor to occupy the property in a “continuous, uninterrupted, peaceable, public, and unequivocal” manner for thirty years. Washitah Mu’ur Nation of the Smai Tawi Temple fell well short of that time frame, occupying three houses for only a number of months. They made a good run, but eventually the police arrested four members of the group at their squat on North Rampart in the Bywater. They pleaded not guilty to charges of criminal trespassing. Three of the squatters refused to sign a peace bond required for release and provided the names Batman and Sub Zero in municipal court.²⁶ The property owner, Fred Hines of

California, according to the *Times-Picayune*, wants these young homeless people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to be prosecuted to the “full extent of the law possible.” It looks like he will get his wish. Besides the charges of criminal trespassing, simple burglary, and the punitive charge of resisting arrest (for refusing to give their names or stating legally false names), at least one of the four now face felony burglary charges and up to twelve years in prison. Although it was a simple homeowner that called the police, arresting harmless young squatters and charging them with felonies that could imprison them for up to twelve years shows how the powerful use the law as a potent weapon to dispose of socially unproductive members of capitalist society or people that pose threats, however insignificant, to the established order.

This behavior is reminiscent of what the sociologist Steven Spitzer calls “social junk” and “social dynamite.” Social junk, from the point of view of the dominant class, is a costly yet relatively harmless burden to society. The lack of creditability of social junk resides in the failure, inability, or refusal of this group to participate in the roles supportive of capitalist society. Social junk is most likely to come to official attention when informal resources have been exhausted or when the magnitude of the problem becomes significant enough to create a basis for “public concern.”²⁷ Social dynamite actively questions “established relationships, especially relations of production and domination.... Social dynamite tends to be more youthful, alienated and politically volatile than social junk. The control of social dynamite is usually premised on an assumption that the problem is acute in nature, requiring a rapid and focused expenditure of control resources.”²⁸ The Washitah Mu’ur Nation of the Smai Tawi Temple, composed of homeless idealistic youths, can fall into either of these categories, depending on one’s point of view. Either way, the felony charges are a clear example of the state’s attempt to remove transgressive social actors, or “problem populations” and unproductive members of capitalism, from society and lock them in cages. In this exclusive society, transgressive social actors are nuisances that cause problems for the powerful. The state serves as a vital weapon of

the powerful to exclude these transgressive populations from the social world and its institutions.

According to follow-up newspaper reports, the member of the Washitah Mu'ur Nation facing felony charges, who calls himself Atum-Bey, grew up as a middle-class kid in my home neighborhood, Gentilly. He was, according to his mother, a gifted child who "won quiz-bowl-style competitions, played football, and displayed a kind of magnetic personality and independence that led other kids to gravitate toward him. His grades and ACT scores won him a full scholarship to Loyola University." He became intellectually curious about the world and began to "search for meaning to life's unanswerable questions." This is what led him to explore the many ideologies of various groups and cults as well as classic and New Age philosophies. Even the local newspaper admits that "authorities may also be trying to make an example of the Washitaw" and the practice of squatting, as "staffers in Orleans Parish say they increasingly have had to deal with an avalanche of sham filings" from homeless people trying to claim vacant or unused homes.²⁹

Perhaps the social junk is getting pissed and transforming into social dynamite. As the powerful in our society continue to meet resistance from those who most acutely experience the structural problems posed by late modernity, and as people become increasingly disenchanted with a society steeped in the contradictions between its promises of freedom and wealth and exclusive institutions that grant such privileges to only a select privileged few, we can expect governments to play a larger role in dishing out harsh discipline to transgressive populations. Such is the case with the homeless youths of the Washitah Mu'ur Nation, who, despite their nonviolent claims to a home not of their legal possession, and despite the fact that nothing was damaged or taken from the home, face punishments similar to those handed out to the most violent members of our society. Atum-Bey's saddened mother understands the contradictions of the system's version of "justice," stating: "If the goal of the legal system is to correct bad behavior and redirect criminals toward productive lives, it is doing the opposite in this case. He's going to have to get

a job sometime. Having a felony on his record is not going to help with that.”³⁰ As the graffiti of a house in the Mid-City neighborhood says: “Homeless people plus empty buildings equals society fails.”

A NIGHT AT THE HOMELESS SHELTER

Given that homeless shelters exist, I wondered why some people choose instead to sleep underneath interstates and in filthy, dilapidated squats.³¹ The excerpt below stems from my experiences spending the night in a homeless shelter near the Central Business District in New Orleans.

Near the corners of Clio Street and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, a sign points to the check-in building for the New Orleans Mission, a local homeless shelter. At around 4:30 p.m., people begin showing up in numbers. Only about two blocks away, beneath the elevated Pontchartrain Expressway, dozens of people prepare for another homeless evening with scores of their compatriots. Some down-and-out folks arrive at the shelter for an evening meal and return to the nearby underpass; others arrive for a night's rest away from the outside elements. A line of men queue for admittance into the shelter. A guy with missing teeth pats down the bedraggled men like a cop during an arrest.

While looking at a sheet of paper containing some sort of list, he starts asking questions. First he requests my ID, which I don't have. “What's your name?” he asks. I tell him, and for some reason he begins checking a four- or five-page packet with names on it. He tells me to lift my arms and begins to pat me down, touching my chest, stomach, legs, ankles, and feeling around the pockets of my jeans. Satisfied, he points the way forward. I enter the homeless shelter through a storage area, down past the women's bathroom and a kitchen, and head into a large cafeteria area—a converted warehouse, really—with long, white folding tables and black chairs.

A man sits behind a desk with a computer where he processes people for a bed ticket. He asks for my name, Social Security

number, birth date, and if I have taken a tuberculosis test. He informs me that I must get the test done within a week in order to remain at the shelter. The black man behind the desk enters my information into a computer and writes out a ticket. He hands me a questionnaire and invites me to sit at a table on the side of a cafeteria to wait for an entry interview.

I enter an office where three people sit behind computers, asking people questions and writing answers on a form. Those forms are later entered into a computer database. The man asks me for my name, my reason for needing a homeless shelter (as though that wasn't already obvious), if I am on parole, was recently in jail, am former military, or am addicted to drugs and alcohol. I provide my name and reply "No, no, and no" to the other questions.

Then we arrive at the religious part of the interview. He asks if I believe in God. I said I don't know. He asks if I died today and the Lord appeared before me and asks me why I should receive entry into heaven, what would I say. "I'm not sure." He asks, "So you don't believe in God?" He instructs me to wait outside at the white folding tables while he enters the data into a computer. After about five minutes, they call me back into the office. Another man tells me to sit at his desk and begins to ask more questions about my faith in Jesus. He drills me about God, why I don't believe, the importance of eternity, and so on. This was all an attempt to get me into a twenty-one-day program. It reminded me of Orwell's observation: "It is curious how people take it for granted that they have a right to preach at you and pray over you as soon as your income falls below a certain level."

After about fifteen or twenty minutes of questions and a lecture on the importance of faith, he tells me to sit next to another man, who asks even more of the same questions before taking my picture. He tells me that everyone must take a shower before going to bed and asks if I need clothes. He hands me a packet that contains cotton swabs, a razor, face towel, the New Testament, lotion, a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and finally, a bed ticket. He directs me into a makeshift chapel, where a full-

blown religious scene unfolds, reminiscent of one that would take place in a Charismatic storefront church in the inner city.

Thumping, religiously inspired Christian music fills the room, now packed with both men and women dancing and clapping in jubilation—some people even get the Holy Ghost and speak in tongues. A huge black man plays the keyboards while a skinny white guy plays guitar. We all sit in this church service, listening to the pounding music in anticipation of the preacher about to deliver a sermon. Unlike Orwell's experience at Christian-influenced homeless shelters, many people heed the church service with unadulterated enthusiasm. They shout "amen," "yes," and other cries of affirmation. Others sit tired in their place, calmly and solemnly waiting for the service to end. The music lasts for over a half an hour.

The chapel space consists of a makeshift room in a warehouse with sets of pews facing an altar composed of a podium with space for musicians and a lectern. One sign in the chapel says, "Please sit up, no laying [*sic*] down." A preacher arrives at the scene with an uplifting sermon about how all the people here will become future leaders, teachers, service people, and preachers who have yet to realize their potentials because of a stranglehold placed upon their lives. After an altar call during which three people approach either for prayer or salvation, more music plays. The service finally ends at about 7:10 p.m. The women exit the chapel on one side, men on the other. The church service is the only activity in the homeless shelter both sexes share. While the women leave to eat at another building, the men make their way to the cafeteria. We wait in the dinner line for about ten minutes. The men stand sadly, their faces long and their stomachs empty. They say nothing to one another, looking either at the floor or into the distance.

Most of the men leave immediately after dinner. About fifty men remain to sleep in the shelter. At about 7:45, I walk around to the outside of the facility near the weights area. One of the workers scolds me, saying overnight guests are not allowed to walk around the facilities. He orders me to sit in the chapel area with the rest of the men.

Most of the men blankly stare at a television screen, sitting in the pews in the same space that was just a few minutes ago a church service. At 8 p.m. a man yells, "Smoke break!" I walk down the steps with the men heading outside. The smoke break lasts for about ten minutes. It's the only time the men are allowed to congregate outside or have a smoke before bed. After smoking, the men return to the chapel room to sit in the pews and watch the Nicholas Cage movie *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*.³² Most sit silently, almost evenly distributed across the chapel area. Some read, but most watch TV. Some talk, but most are silent.

In order to sleep at the shelter, one must present a bed ticket to a nighttime bed monitor with the word "approved" highlighted in yellow on the back of the ticket, next to the day's date. It is only possible to get this word "approved" highlighted (aside from smuggling in your own highlighter) from a shower monitor, who admits the men into the showers and provides them with a towel. The shower monitor hands me a towel and watches me enter the shower and bathroom area.

The community showers resemble the showers one would find in prison. About six naked men stand together in close proximity underneath showerheads, most wearing sandals or flip-flops. I have no sandals or anything to cover my feet and feel a slight revulsion about stepping with my bare feet in the showers. Instead, I spend about twenty-five minutes washing my face, wetting my hair, brushing my teeth, and other ablutions until enough men have come and gone that no one will notice that I avoided the shower. Before leaving the shower area, I make sure to drench my face, hair, and chest in water while walking out rubbing a towel over my head as if I just finished bathing. The man highlights "approved" on the back of my bed ticket.

Showers shut down at about 8:30 p.m., bedtime starts at 9 p.m., and lights out at 10 p.m. There are about seventy-five single-sized bunk beds on the second floor of the warehouse. First, a man with a list of names asks for your bed ticket. He looks over his sheet to find your name and makes sure the back of the ticket says "approved." He asks me what is in my plastic bag. I reply, "What y'all gave me." Most of the men lie in bed sleeping; some

stare at the black ceiling and the dim fluorescent lights. When you get to your bunk you must put on the mattress cover and pillowcase. Some men sit up, many coughing; others toss and turn. One man reads on his laptop. One man says he did twenty-two years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola and that homeless shelters offer about the same experience. At about 9:45 a man with a clipboard looks around to make sure we are in the right beds. The lights shut off promptly at 10 p.m., leaving the room nearly completely dark. We are left with our private thoughts while lying awake and listening to the sounds that dozens of men make throughout the night. People begin to wake up at 5:30 in the morning. Breakfast begins at 6 a.m., and an hour later everyone must leave.

Sleeping at homeless shelters is highly structured. Once a homeless man enters the shelter—which must be by 6 p.m.—the workers completely regulate his life. One feels worthless in a homeless shelter and, worse, beholden to others who can “save” you. There is nothing more revolting than getting help from people who fancy themselves your saviors. In many ways, we are fortunate that shelters such as these provide homeless men and women a place to eat and sleep. But I’d prefer a night beneath the overpass or in a squat any day.

HOMELESS PEOPLE + EMPTY BUILDINGS = SOCIETY FAILS

Scores of homeless people, transient youths, bums, squatters, skells, vagabonds, and wanderers exist in the urban fringes of postindustrial New Orleans. I encountered dozens of homeless travelers, from Roma drifters to train hoppers to old and tired black bums to drugged-out middle-aged white folks to young homeless families with small children. I interviewed dozens of homeless youths in their twenties who sit all day in the grassy areas of Jackson Square or on its benches facing St. Louis Cathedral. There is even a woman who calls herself the “mother of Jackson

Square” who acts as a semimaternal figure to the many homeless street kids who roam the area. While some of these kids may suffer from mental-health issues, most seem to have mental faculties similar to most “normal” folks, even if they have a disdain for authority and rules.

Amid the tourist and entertainment zones of the French Quarter, swarms of homeless people exist in the background but in plain sight of the relatively wealthy tourists strolling Crescent City streets. Many of their sad stories involve destroyed families and shattered dreams, along with wishes, hopes, and unrealized aspirations. In these streets, you will find the stories of people like Suna and Liz, two homeless transients who drifted from one dilapidated house to another trying to find some normalcy in a city that denied them a warm welcome. Their squats were filled with garbage, filth, and crawling insects and pests. Barely in their twenties, they began to look, over a short period of time, as broken down and dilapidated as their squats. But they somehow maintained a stubborn resiliency, recording their wild and sad journeys on cheap cellphones—and they even fell in love and requested a gutter-punk wedding right on the Moonwalk overlooking the majestic Mississippi River. Liz says she is now pregnant. They have a friend named Louis, a local kid they left behind when moving out to, hopefully, better pastures. Louis is homeless but still hopes to attend the University of New Orleans one day. He now has a kid on the way, too.

Many of the young homeless lads turn tricks for homosexual men to earn money, and their street girlfriends take odd jobs, like learning to mime with people like Gold Man. Underneath the St. Claude overpass and other interstate overpasses in the city you will find tent camps where dozens of homeless people create makeshift homes and pockets of protection.

Meanwhile, thousands of vacant houses dot the streets of New Orleans. Many of these houses were abandoned following Hurricane Katrina and remain abandoned. No one knows what to do with these unclaimed properties, but most people intuitively understand that a city with an abundance of both empty houses and homeless people amounts to a failed society. Despite living in

a so-called progressive era, a hatred for the poor remains prevalent. As Orwell put it, “It is fatal to look hungry. It makes people want to kick you.” We hold on to the notion that poor people somehow deserve their fate. In 2014, Louisiana voters rejected a proposed amendment to the state constitution that “would have allowed for the sale of abandoned property following Hurricane Katrina for \$100 per lot. Voters disagreed with the Legislature’s plan to essentially donate the abandoned properties. The effect of the no vote, however, was that the abandoned properties remained abandoned.”³³ The idea of giving free handouts to poor people is, apparently, more revolting than the squats and urban campsites of the homeless or the sight of rotting houses that once served as homes.

Considering homelessness a personal issue focuses attention on the individual lives of the many varieties of homeless types throughout the city, each with a unique and fascinating story yet to be written. There is no single event that typically leads to becoming homeless. Rather, a series of steps occur in a longer process. For most of us, we are only a few steps away from the same sad stories the homeless tell us about their lives. And when we tally up our own political and economic capital, most of us are socially and economically much closer to homeless bums than to the politicians for whom we vote. Yet we identify more with our politicians than our homeless brothers and sisters. The personal troubles of homeless people remain just that: personal troubles—even though that same fate may befall any of us at any point in our lives. But personal troubles do little to explain the structural issues that surround homelessness in the many makeshift squats all over the city.

When we find so many vacant houses and homeless people and transients living on the urban fringes in dilapidated squats, the problem goes beyond the personal troubles of milieu.³⁴ Rather, this is a structural problem where the disease lies in the very nature of our societal institutions. Ameliorating the disease requires operating at the institutional level, changing the composition of our society. It requires a cultural shift in our way of thinking, especially with regard to the value of human life. A

society that threatens to build walls between countries, deports vulnerable humans without “papers,” allows police officers to manhandle children and shoot unarmed black men, drops bombs on villages in the Middle East, claims that foreign policies that lead to the death of over 500,000 children is good for the country,²⁵ creates drug laws to destroy and undermine progressive thinkers and marginalized black communities, and, on top of it all, allows the social problem of homelessness to exist when houses remain vacant is, in short, a fucked-up world in need of massive and revolutionary change.

